

**Review of 'Harvard and the  
Unabomber: The Education of An  
American Terrorist'**

David W. Gill

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**Harvard and the Unabomber: The Education of An American Terrorist** by Alston Chase. New York: Norton, 2003. 432 pages.

Alston Chase, a writer and independent scholar specializing in intellectual history, was the author of a major article on “Harvard and the Making of the Unabomber” in *The Atlantic* in June 2000. His new book is a brilliant, extremely well-researched expansion of that article. The focus of the narrative is, of course, Theodore Kaczynski, now serving a sentence of life in prison without possibility of parole for his bombs which murdered or maimed several people during his 1978–95 “Unabomber” terrorist attacks on representative leaders of “industrial society.”

By an eerie coincidence, Kaczynski was a professor of mathematics at the University of California, Berkeley, for my final two years enrolled there, 1967–69. I was an odd combination history major and math minor, preparing at that time to be a high school teacher, but had no math classes with Kaczynski and wasn’t even aware of his existence in our huge university, embroiled in a great deal of chaos and protest those years.

More to the point for Ellul Forum readers, Kaczynski was a great enthusiast for Jacques Ellul from 1971 or 1972 onward. Kaczynski said about Ellul’s Technological Society, “when I read the book ... for the first time, I was delighted, because I thought, ‘Here is someone who is saying what I have already been thinking’” (p. 92). Kaczynski’s brother David later said that Ellul’s Technological Society “became Ted’s Bible” (p. 332). According to author Chase, Kaczynski even exchanged letters with Ellul. Now those would be a fascinating read!

Kaczynski, you will recall, managed to get the *Washington Post* and *New York Times* to print his very lengthy essay “Industrial Society and Its Future” (the “Unabomber Manifesto”) in September 1995 by promising to cease his terrorist killings if they did so. This “victory” led to his defeat because David Kaczynski recognized the author of the text as his brother and blew the whistle on him.

The “Manifesto” did not refer specifically to Ellul (thankfully!) but it is indisputable that Ellul’s concept of “Technique” as a way of thinking (not just a set of tools), as an ensemble of means that had become an end in itself, ever expanding throughout the world and into every domain of life, having a virtually deterministic, necessary character, was central to Kaczynski’s view of the world.

Alston Chase gets three cheers from this reviewer for the understanding of Ellul he brings to his analysis. “Despite corresponding with Ellul, Kaczynski ignored virtually all that the French philosopher had written since 1964 ... It would seem Kaczynski ‘imprinted’ on the early Ellul and ignored what followed... he did not even own a copy of *The Ethics of Freedom*. Kaczynski’s faith in the efficacy of revolution had apparently remained unchanged despite, not because of, the later admonitions of Ellul” (p. 93).

”Curiously, Kaczynski revered Joseph Conrad and Jacques Ellul, both of whom deplored violence and advocated the spiritual life... Blinded by scientism and rage, he missed the message of Ellul, Paz, and Conrad altogether” (pp. 363364). Chase shows how Kaczynski’s “revolution” illustrated precisely the phenomenon against which Ellul

warned in his *Autopsy of Revolution*: a violent, technological response simply reinforces the grip of Technique!

Chase's careful personal and intellectual biography of Kaczynski delivers a read that is not only fascinating but illuminating and persuasive. It offers insights not just into Kaczynski himself but into the broader topic of terrorism. Terrorists use ideas to justify appalling acts of violence but ideas alone do not create terrorists. Families, teachers, institutions, experiences, and, finally, personal choices are all part of the true explanation. Kaczynski emerges not as a clinically insane person but as a brilliantly twisted, deluded, enraged, and evil man. Chase shows how technological society is partly, but not wholly, to blame for the creation of a Kaczynski. A remarkable book.

The Ted K Archive

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